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ABSTRACT

A case study examined how the adult student population redefines the subject of freshman composition; whether familiarity with the traditional student population makes the academic world oblivious to cognitive differences and/or separate learning needs among adult students; and whether the current pedagogy is responsive to the needs of adult students. Subjects were students of Rutgers University at Newark, 3578 traditional students enrolled at the Newark College of Arts and Sciences (NCAS), 1962 nontraditional students enrolled at University College (UC), and 444 enrolled at the College of Nursing, ranging in age from 16 years old to 65+ years of age. Entering freshmen are required to take the New Jersey Basic Skills Test (NJBST), and transfer students must take the Writing Placement Test (WPT). Scores suggest that NCAS and UC students enter Rutgers-Newark at a comparable ability level. While this may appear to be an anticlimatic finding, for Rutgers-Newark and other institutions with similar programs, it runs counter to the conventional wisdom. While NCAS students have recent--and successful--high school experiences, UC students are often quite distant from their last formal education (and for many the experience was less than successful). If ability level is the same but learning experiences differ, then nontraditional pedagogy--or andragogy--is more appropriate to this group than methods that have been targeted to a traditional age group. (Seven notes are included, and 1 appendix of evaluation questions is attached.) (RAE)

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Educating Adults and Non-traditional Students:
Some Implications of the Changing Demographics
in Freshman Composition

by

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Note: The case study described in this paper was conducted while
the author was Director of Writing Programs at Rutgers
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While it is a truism to say that the audience for instruction in introductory college writing courses is diverse, including students in minority groups, those who are part of the influx of third world peoples, and those who need special preparation, I'd like to suggest that even this inclusiveness falls short of reality. No doubt, the population of colleges and universities has changed rapidly in the past twenty-five years or so. Mina Shaughnessy first addressed a particular segment of that change, as the group that K. Patricia Cross has called "new students"--that is, those who entered college ranks for whatever reason who would not have had the opportunity to do so in times past--emerged in two- and four-year institutions throughout the country.¹ We have now, however, a striking change in that demography that has less to do with ethnicity or level of preparation--though these are important subfactors--than it does with age. Students in college are older; students in entry-level writing courses are older. There is now what Stephen Brookfield

calls a "new majority" on college campuses, a population of adult students, which on many campuses now outnumber traditional students.²

What is an adult student? The term offers some problems, which I have explored more fully elsewhere, but for our purposes let us agree that we generally mean students who are beyond the age of traditional college students, 18 to 22 years of age. We also mean students whose education has likely been interrupted, students who frequently study in part-time programs or who stop in and out of college as they are able to attend. These are students who have held fulltime jobs--and usually continue to hold them as they study--for the sake of supporting families and paying bills. Finally, in defining adult or nontraditional students I would suggest that there are distinctive, and recognizable, motives and motivations in their engagement with education. Those teachers who work with adult students frequently comment on their high degree of commitment to learning. My definition is brief, and I am cognizant of its limitations because I have spent much time at completing this picture.

I'll offer just a few numbers to support my contention that adult students are more than an isolated minority on college campuses. Unfortunately, it is not possible to state accurately how many nontraditional students are currently participating in college writing courses of one sort or another. However, the national statistics on adult education do allow us to make some inferences. In higher education, a recent study indicates that

"of the 12 million college students in the United States, only about 2 million are full time, living on campus, and aged 18 - 22."³ Many of the remaining 10 million are commuter and "new students," as Cross calls them, and they have grown in number especially at community and urban colleges. Among undergraduate students twenty-two years of age and older, enrollments increased by 52% during the period between 1979 and 1983, an increase that brought enrollments among this age group to 6.5 million.⁴ According to Carol Aslanian of the College Board, 40% of college students in the United States are 25 years of age or older.⁵ Cross estimates that two-thirds of the students registered at open admissions colleges can be defined as nontraditional.⁶ How many of these enrolled in writing courses? It is certain that most of them must fulfill writing requirements by one means or another: placement testing, courses in skills and freshman composition, proficiency or exit testing.

Some general questions this data raises for us:

How does this new population redefine the subject of freshman composition?

Are these students better? worse? different?

Does our familiarity with a traditional 18-year-old population make us oblivious to cognitive differences and/or separate learning needs among adult students?

Is current pedagogy, especially as marketed by the major textbook publishers, responsive to the needs of adult students?

Such questions must begin with the problem that many nontraditional students enter college without benefit of SAT

scores, high school rankings, and similar data. Even when this information is available, it may be dated and irrelevant.

At the Newark campus of Rutgers University an ideal situation for a direct comparison of traditional and nontraditional students exists because most students enter parallel but separate programs, with a single writing director responsible for placement and proficiency testing of both groups. Rutgers - Newark is an urban campus, with a predominantly commuter population. Within the University at this campus three units grant undergraduate degrees: the Newark College of Arts and Sciences (NCAS), the College of Nursing (CN), and University College (UC). For all intents and purposes, the first two are the same (that is, the nurses are part of NCAS), and University College, which serves the evening and part-time students (not necessarily the same) is separate. For shorthand, I'll simply say day or evening college.

Some points of comparison⁷:

Enrollment 1987 - 88

	Total	Fulltime	Parttime
NCAS	3578	3142/87.8%	436/12.2%
UC	1962	420/21.4%	1542/78.6%
CN	444	371/83.6%	73/16.4%

Enrollment by Gender

	Total	Male	Female
NCAS	3578	1948 (54.4%)	1630 (45.6%)
UC	1962	848 (43.7%)	1104 (56.3%)
CN	444	23 (5.2%)	421 (94.8%)

Enrollment by Race

	Total	WHT	BLK	PR	HISP	ASIAN	OTHER
NCAS	3578	2143	472	151	297	323	192
		(59.9%)	(----- 40.1% -----)				
UC	1962	722	814	76	112	90	148
		(36.8%)	(----- 63.2% -----)				
CN	444	282	75	13	18	38	18
		(63.5%)	(----- 36.5% -----)				

Enrollment by Age

AGE	NCAS	UC	CN
16-17	48	1	1
18-22	2586	442	273
23-24	430	297	43
25-29	296	524	53
30-44	184	582	62
45-64	19	94	9
65+	6	7	0
Totals	3578	1962	444

The statistics on student population reveal significant differences between the day and evening schools, especially with regard to age, race, and gender. Even casual observations by many of my colleagues consistently noted that UC students tend to be older and black. Approximately 60% of the UC students I observed in a systematic review of freshman writing courses are black women in their late 20s to mid 40s. NCAS students, on the other hand, tend to be between 18 and 22 years old and white, and they are fairly evenly divided between men and women. Notably, as I reviewed NCAS entrants for placement in writing courses, I had very complete information on SATs, high schools attended, class rank, and so forth. For UC students such information was so erratic that no effort was made to compile it for the Writing Director's use. Rather, I relied heavily on information from surveys that I developed myself.

Method:

With the objective of comparing these two groups for ability in writing, the evaluation process was necessarily complicated by a dual testing within each group. Entering freshmen (those with fewer than 12 credit hours) are required to take the New Jersey Basic Skills Test (NJBST), and transfer students (those with 12 or more credit hours) must take the Writing Placement Test (WPT). The percentage of transfer students in both groups is so large (as high as 70% for UC) that this group could not be eliminated from the study. Besides, both groups are finally evaluated by

the same objectives for placement into or waiver from the same courses. If both groups could be incorporated into the same study, quite simply, we'd know more. It is worth noting that the opportunity to compare groups on this basis had only arisen because for the first time both groups were to be given the same set of tests. Formerly, NCAS transfer students took a different transfer test than UC students. Now we had a basis for comparison in both areas, freshmen in NCAS and UC and transfers in NCAS and UC.

The readers for the comparative evaluation were familiar with the standards of the institution, but for our reading purposes required a reliable and concrete set of criteria on which to scale the papers. For this I selected the scoring guide for the General Educational Development Writing Sample. For those unfamiliar with it, I have included a copy in the handouts. It is a six point system, with 1 representing the low and 6 representing the high. A 0 is unscorable. In its actual use for GED papers, a 4 represents a "passing" score. The Scoring Guide was developed for the new writing skills requirement of the GED test, and it has been field-tested among thousands of traditional high school students. The readers first practised applying these criteria on the samples provided by the GED to accompany the Scoring Guide and then on samples from the 200+ papers available to us in this testing. Then they began to score "live" papers, with occasional breaks to "retune" themselves to the criteria with additional samples. Readers did not know from which school papers came, though they did know which test they were reading.

Each test received three readings, and I took either an average (4, if the scores were 3, 4, and 5) or a majority (3, if there was a 3, 3, and a 2). If a score was more than a point removed from the other two, I dropped it (if there was a 4, 5 and 2, I dropped the 2) and took the lower of the other two scores (4). In addition to the scores, I wanted a descriptive analysis of the papers. To obtain this, I devised the questionnaire which is included in the handouts. It is designed to allow a rapid response, and to further expedite these responses, I asked readers to fill out only one questionnaire for every fourth paper read.

Results:

The results of the test and reading offer both a comparison of skill ability and an idea about the nature of those skills. In terms of raw scores, both groups seem about even. Here are the comparative scores for both groups in both tests:

Comparative Scores -- NJBST

<u>Score</u>	<u>NCAS</u>		<u>UC</u>	
	<u>#</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>%</u>
1	0	--	0	--
2	5	18%	4	18%
3	8	29%	7	32%
4	10	36%	10	45%
5	5	18%	1	5%
6	0	--	0	--
0	0	--	0	--
Totals:	28		22	
Total:	50			

<u>Score</u>	Comparative Scores -- WPT			
	<u>NCAS</u>		<u>UC</u>	
	<u>#</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>#</u>	<u>%</u>
1	1	3%	1	3%
2	7	20%	4	9%
3	11	31%	12	27%
4	12	34%	18	41%
5	3	9%	6	14%
6	1	3%	0	--
0	0	--	3	7%
Totals:	35		44	
Total:	89			

Comparative Ratings on Descriptive Response Sheet -- NJBST

		NCAS	UC
I.	1.	0	0
	2.	0	1
	3.	0	0
	4.	2	2
	5.	17	14
II.	1.	0	1
	2.	7	7
	3.	3	6
	4.	3	3
	5.	2	0
III.	1.	0	5
	2.	6	5
	3.	4	5
	4.	2	2
	5.	3	0
IV.	1.	2	0
	2.	6	5
	3.	6	6
	4.	4	6
	5.	1	0
V.	1.	3	0
	2.	1	0
	3.	3	3
	4.	10	6
	5.	2	8

Comparative Ratings on Descriptive Response Sheet -- WPT

		NCAS	UC
I.	1.	9	16
	2.	0	0
	3.	0	0
	4.	0	0
	5.	1	1
II.	1.	1	3
	2.	1	5
	3.	3	1
	4.	2	2
	5.	4	6
III.	1.	2	6
	2.	4	6
	3.	4	4
	4.	2	1
	5.	0	0
IV.	1.	3	3
	2.	3	7
	3.	5	4
	4.	0	1
	5.	0	2
V.	1.	3	4
	2.	2	1
	3.	1	5
	4.	4	4
	5.	1	3

The descriptive responses appear to tell as much about the tests as they do the students. The prompt or test question for the NJBST invites predictable and formulaic responses, with little reference to personal experience. In both groups, this test drew almost no references to self. NCAS students relied exclusively on implied statements of purpose, if one was made at all, while nearly all UC students included a statement of purpose, with a third of these being stated outright. In both groups, language control fell evenly among the 2 - 4 range. In both groups, papers tended to be ordinary and predictable.

In the WPT, contrary to the NJBST, both groups relied heavily on autobiography. But UC students seemed better able to turn autobiography toward analytical and abstract purposes. Again, UC students seemed slightly better able to state their purposes for writing. They also exhibited slightly better language control than NCAS students on this test. Finally, both groups seemed better able to provide innovative approaches or striking moments than for the NJBST.

Conclusion:

Scores suggest that NCAS and UC students enter Rutgers-Newark at a comparable ability level. While this may appear an anti-climactic finding, for Rutgers - Newark, and possibly for many institutions with similar programs, it runs counter to the conventional wisdom. The idea of comparable ability is of further interest because ability levels have been attained in

different ways. While NCAS students have recent--and successful--high school experiences, UC students are often quite distant from their last formal education, and for many the experience was less than successful. The only safe generalization about their educational preparation is that it is diverse, probably an accumulation of life and work experiences, probably acquired in ways that are distinct from the usual routines of the high school and college classroom. Some have had college experiences prior to the testing, yet this, too, may not be recent or successful. If ability level is the same but learning experiences differ, then we need to consider that nontraditional pedagogy--or andragogy, as it has come to be known--is more appropriate to this group than methods that have been targeted to a traditional age group.

Notes

¹Mina Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford, 1977); K. Patricia Cross, Accent on Learning: Improving and Reshaping the Curriculum (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976), p. 4.

² Stephen B. Brookfield, Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986), p. 69.

³ H. Hodgkinson, "The Changing Face of Tomorrow's Student," Change, May-June 1985, 38 - 39.

⁴ M. O'Keefe, "What Ever Happened to the Class of '80 '81 '82 '83 '84 '85?" Change, May - June 1985, 37 - 41.

⁵ Carol Aslanian, "Americans in Transition," paper presented at Central Michigan University Conference on Adults in Higher Education, Mount Pleasant, Mich., June 1987.

⁶ K. Patricia Cross, "Adult Education for the Twenty-first Century," keynote address at Central Michigan University Conference on Adults in Higher Education, Mount Pleasant, Mich., June 1987.

⁷ "The Rutgers-Newark Fact Book," April 1988

Appendix

NJBST _____

Reader # _____

WPT _____

Paper # _____

I. The paper uses autobiographical narrative to respond to the prompt:

1. _____ The paper is completely autobiographical.
2. _____ The paper uses autobiography to support abstract points.
3. _____ The paper uses some autobiography but relies on other rhetorical modes than narrative.
4. _____ A single autobiographical incident is cited.
5. _____ No personal references are made.

II. The paper uses analytical / critical modes to respond to the prompt:

1. _____ The paper is entirely analytical / critical, with several concrete examples used for supporting evidence.
2. _____ The paper is moderately analytical.
3. _____ An attempt at analysis is made, but it is unsubstantiated by evidence or examples.
4. _____ The paper exhibits little analysis.
5. _____ The paper is not analytical.

III. The paper exhibits a strong statement of purpose:

1. _____ Very clear statement of purpose (or thesis statement) at or near the outset, which continues to inform and direct the paper.
2. _____ Statement of purpose is implied but present. The paper exhibits direction, with some tangents.
3. _____ Purpose / intent is not clear, though the paper as a whole does exhibit some coherence.
4. _____ Statement of purpose is not present, and the paper rambles somewhat.
5. _____ The paper exhibits little sense of purpose or coherence.

IV. The paper exhibits language control:

1. _____ Very good language control.
2. _____ Good control, with a few lapses in grammar / usage.
3. _____ Moderate control, with evidence that some areas of grammar / usage are unclear to the writer.
4. _____ Weak control.
5. _____ Grammar and usage are highly deficient.

V. The paper attempts to be innovative in style / approach:

1. _____ Surprising beginning and maintains interest.
2. _____ Surprising beginning but loses interest.
3. _____ A few surprising or striking moments in the paper.
4. _____ Little that is striking.
5. _____ Very ordinary, even predictable.

If you checked 1, 2, or 3, please specify the innovative technique used by the writer (eg., "Wrote her autobiography in the third person."):